

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

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AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY OTTAWA

USMISSION GENEVA

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LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SREF, VN, AS

SUBJ: AUSTRALIAN REFUGEE POLICY: MACKELLAR'S TRIP TO SOUTH-EAST ASIA

1. SUMMARY: GOA IMMIGRATION MINISTER MIKE MACKELLAR HAD ASST. SEC. SIMINGTON DEBRIEF EMBOFF ON MACKELLAR'S RECENT TRIP TO REFUGEE LOCATIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND MOOD RESULTING THEREFROM. ESSENCE IS THAT GOA REMAINS PESSIMISTIC ABOUT LIKELY DOWNTURN IN REFUGEE NUMBERS IN PROXIMATE FUTURE, BUT MACKELLAR WAS PROFOUNDLY IMPRESSED BY BOTH THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM AND THE FACT THAT THESE REFUGEES ARE FLEEING POLITICAL PERSECUTION RATHER THAN BEING MERE ECONOMIC MIGRANTS. GOA IMMIGRATION OFFICIALS ARE NOW CONFIDENT THAT THEY CAN SUSTAIN AUSTRALIA'S PRESENT DEGREE OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE EFFORT AND EVEN SPOKE GUARDEDLY ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF DOING MORE

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PROVIDED THAT THE OUT-FLOW OF REFUGEES FROM INDOCHINA SHOWS SOME SIGNS OF ABATING IN THE NEXT FOUR TO SIX MONTHS. (THIS LATTER POINT MUST NOT RPT NOT, HOWEVER, BE PERMITTED TO LEAK OUT LEST IT COMPROMISE GOA'S ABILITY TO DELIVER.) END SUMMARY.

2. CLEARLY, MACKELLAR HAS BEEN PROFOUNDLY IMPRESSED BY

THE COMBINATION OF THE DISCUSSIONS WHEN SHEP LOWMAN WAS HERE IN MID-JUNE AND MACKELLAR'S TRIP TO REFUGEE LOCATIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA IN LATE JULY DURING WHICH HE TESTED HIS THINKING AGAINST WHAT HE SAW ON THE GROUND. MACKELLAR WAS WIDELY QUOTED IN THE AUSTRALIAN PRESS UPON HIS RETURN AS SAYING "THE WORLD HASN'T REALIZED THE MAGNITUDE OF THE REFUGEE PROBLEM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. THE FEELING OF ASEAN MINISTERS AND REFUGEES ALIKE IS THAT A LOT OF COUNTRIES HAVE TALKED ABOUT FREEDOM, BUT NOW THAT WE HAVE SEEN PEOPLE WHO HAVE VOTED FOR FREEDOM WITH THEIR FEET, THE WORLD IS JUST STANDING AROUND DOING NOTHING."

3. SIMINGTON, ASKED POINT-BLANK WHETHER THERE HAD BEEN A CHANGE IN SOME AUSTRALIAN OFFICIALS' PREDISPOSITIONS TOWARD SEEING THE REFUGEES AS "ECONOMIC MIGRANTS", READILY CONCEDED THAT THERE WAS NO LONGER MUCH REMAINING DOUBT THAT THE VAST MAJORITY COULD LEGITIMATELY BE DESCRIBED AS HAVING FLED FROM POLITICAL AS WELL AS ECONOMIC PERSECUTION. HE SAID AS A RESULT, HE WAS CONFIDENT THAT MACKELLAR AND OTHER SENIOR IMMIGRATION DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS WOULD BE MUCH LESS DEFENSIVE IN THEIR PUBLIC STANCES ON THE PROBLEM. MAIL IS RUNNING NINE-TO-ONE AGAINST INDOCHINESE REFUGEES, BUT GOA IMMIGRATION OFFICIALS NOW SEEM MUCH MORE DISPOSED TO SIMPLY WRITING IT OFF AS RACIST PREJUDICE AND IGNORING IT WHILE THEY TRY TO FORMULATE GOVERNMENT POLICIES ALONG MORE HUMANITARIAN LINES.

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4. SIMINGTON AND OTHER GOA OFFICIALS VOLUNTEERED THAT AS A RESULT OF MACKELLAR'S TRIP (FIRST ASST SEC DEREK VOLKER AND ASST SEC SIMINGTON FANNED OUT OVER SOUTHEAST ASIA WITH MACKELLAR), THEY BELIEVED MACKELLAR MIGHT EVEN BE WILLING, IN ANOTHER THREE OR FOUR MONTHS WHEN THE GOA MUST REVIEW ITS PROGRAMS ANYWAY, TO CONSIDER AN EXPANSION OF THE GOA'S INTAKE (WE WOULD GUESS FROM SOMEWHERE AROUND 9000 PER YEAR TO PERHAPS AS MANY AS 13-15,000). NUMBERS WERE, AT LEAST AT THIS STAGE, PURELY SPECULATIVE, BUT SIMINGTON SAID THAT IF RPT IF THE REFUGEE OUTFLOW SHOWED SOME SIGNS OF ABATEMENT, HE WAS CONFIDENT THAT MACKELLAR WOULD FIGHT FOR AN INCREASED PROGRAM. (EMBASSY MUST STRESS HERE THAT ANY PREMATURE DISCUSSION OF THIS, BEYOND THE GENERAL HOPE THAT AUSTRALIA AND OTHERS MIGHT BE ABLE TO DO MORE, WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY QUEER MACKELLAR'S EFFORTS.)

5. KEY TO AUSTRALIAN PLANS, HOWEVER, IS THE GOA'S CONTINUED ABILITY TO DEMONSTRATE CONVINCINGLY TO THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC THAT AUSTRALIA'S FORTHCOMINGNESS WITH RESPECT TO REFUGEES IS NOT UNILATERAL, BUT IS, RATHER, PART OF AN INTERNATIONAL EFFORT IN WHICH THERE WERE MANY OTHER PARTI-

CIPANTS. IF THERE WERE ANY CHANCE THAT THE US, FOR EXAMPLE, WAS ON THE VERGE OF SERIOUSLY CUTTING BACK ITS PROGRAMS, THE GROUND WOULD BE CUT OUT FROM UNDER MACKELLAR AND HE WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY BE FORCED TO TAKE ACTION TO STEM AUSTRALIA'S ACCEPTANCE OF LARGE NUMBERS OF REFUGEES. THE GOA IS PLAINLY QUITE NERVOUS ABOUT THIS, AND SIMINGTON REPEATEDLY BROUGHT THIS UP.

6. SIMINGTON WONDERED WHETHER IT WOULD BE HELPFUL FOR AUSTRALIA TO WEIGH IN WITH THE FRENCH, CANADIANS AND OTHERS ABOUT THE NEED FOR A GREATER INTERNATIONAL EFFORT. EMBOFF VENTURED THE PERSONAL IMPRESSION THAT THE FRENCH WERE DING A GREAT DAL AND WERE ABLE TO BE AS HELPFUL AS THEY HAD BEEN MAINLY BECAUSE OF THE LACK OF PUBLICITY TO THEIR PROGRAM;

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THE CANADIANS, ON THE OTHER HAND, SEEMED HIGHLY RELUCTANT TO DO MUCH MORE. NO HARM WOULD BE DONE BY THE GOA'S SHARING ITS IMPRESSIONS DERIVED FROM MACKELLAR'S TRIP, AND OBVIOUSLY EVERY BIT OF MISSIONARY WORK WOULD HELP IN A PROBLEM THE SIZE OF THIS ONE. SIMINGTON AGREED, AND WE BELIEVE THE GOA WILL BE WEIGHING IN WITH THE CANADIANS, FRENCH AND OTHERS IN THE PROXIMATE FUTURE.

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7. SIMINGTON ALSO, CURIOUSLY, ASKED WHETHER WE THOUGHT THE SEPTEMBER CONFERENCE IN BANGKOK WOULD GO FORWARD. WE SAID WE HAD SEEN NOTHING TO INDICATE IT WOULD NOT, AND SIMINGTON VOLUNTEERED THAT EXCEPT FOR UNHCR, THE AUSTRALIANS THOUGHT JUST ABOUT ALL THOSE INVOLVED AGREED TI WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA-- BUT THE FACT THAT THE GOA KEEPS NERVOUSLY ASKING US WHETHER WE THINK IT IS STILL ON NOW RAISES QUESTIONS IN OUR MINDS. IF DEPARTMENT OR INFO ADDDEES HAVE ANY VIEWS ON THIS, WE WOULD WELCOME THEM

8. FINALLY, SIMINGTON GAVE US A LENGTHY RUN-DOWN ON GOA'S PERCEPTIONS DEVELOPED ON A COUNTY-BY-COUNTRY BASIS DURING THE MACKELLAR VISIT. MOST OF THEM WERE PREDICTABLE AND WE WON'T REPEAT THEM HERE. ONE, HOWEVER, WAS MOST INTERESTING: MACKELLAR CAME AWAY FROM THAILAND WITH THE VERY DISTINCT IMPRESSION THAT RTG OFFICIALS, FROM KRIANGSAK CONFIDENTIAL

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DOWN, ARE MOVING PERCEPTIBLY TOWARD THE CONCLUSION THAT THAILAND MUST MAKE SOME GESTURES TOWARD RESETTLEMENT. THANKFULLY ENOUGH, THE THAI SEEMED MOST DISPOSED TO MOVE IN THE AREA THAT POSES THE GREATEST DIFFICULTY FOR AUSTRALIA (AND, PRESUMABLY, THE US AND OTHERS)-- NAMELY, THE LAO/MEO/HMUNG LAND CAMP PEOPLE. THE GOVERNOR OF NHONG KHAI TOLD MACKELLAR THAT HE FULLY EXPECTED THE REMNANTS OF VANG PAO'S ARMY TO MOVE ACROSS THE BORDER WITHIN SIX OR SEVEN MONTHS (60-70,000STRONG) AND INDICATED WITH A SHRUG AND GESTURES THAT THAILAND WOULD SOMEHOW MANAGE TO COPE. THE AUSTRALIANS' PERCEPTIONS WERE THAT THE RTG VIEWS THE LAO LAND REFUGEE S AS MORE EASILY ASSIMILABLE, AND AT A LOWER COST, AND THAT THIS CAN BE DONE IN REGIONS WHERE THERE ARE ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC SIMILARITIES BETWEEN NATIVE THAI AND THE LAO REFUGEES. THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEES, ON THE OTHER HAND, SEEM TO POSE THE GREATEST PROBLEM FOR THAILAND. IF RPT IF THE INTERNATIONAL EFFORT CAN SHOW SOME SIGN OF BEIN ABLE TO MAKE A DENT IN THE NUMBER OF "VIETNAMESE" REFUGEES, THE AUSTRALIANS BELIEVE THE RTG(WITH SUITABLE INCENTIVES, OF COURSE) MIGHT BE WELLING TO FACE UP TO THE LAO PROBLEM. THIS WOULD BE ABOUT THE BEST THAT COULD BE HOPED FOR, CONSIDERING THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM AND (AS THE AUSTRALIANS SEE IT) THE QUINTESSENTIAL HOPELESSNESS OF THE TASK OF TRYING TO SUCCESSFULLY ASSIMILATE THE LAO LAND CAMP PEOPLE IN TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED WESTERN RECIPIENT

NATIONS. (WE WOULD WELCOME BANGKOK'S COMMENTS ON THIS.)

9. ACTION REQUESTED: MACKELLAR OBVIOUSLY HOPED TO GET SOME REACTION TO US BEFORE THE US-ASEAN BILATERALS. WE BELIEVE IT WOULD BE VERY USEFUL IF THERE COULD BE SOME SUITABLE EXPRESSION OF APPRECIATION FOR THE FORTHCOMINGNESS OF HIS OFFICIALS (PERHAPS IN A "DEAR MIKE" MESSAGE FROM

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ASST SEC HOLBROOKE), AND WE FURTHER BELIEVE THAT IT WOULD BE MOST HELPFUL IF THE DEPARTMENT COULD PROVIDE A CANDID ASSESSMENT OF THE NEAR-FUTURE OUTLOOK FOR THE REFUGEE PROGRAM AND POSSIBLY A REACTION TO THE THOUGHTS IN PARAGRAPH EIGHT ABOVE. IT IS VITAL, HOWEVER, THAT WE NOT RPT NOT PREMATURELY REVEAL TO OTHERS THE POSSIBILITY OF THE AUSTRALIANS BOOSTING THE SIZE OF THEIR PROGRAM-- ESPECIALLY WITH RESPECT TO NUMBERS. ANY PUBLIC DISCUSSION OF THIS BEYOND THE SIMPLE HOPE THAT THE GOA MIGHT BE ABLE TO DO MORE WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY COMPROMISE MACKELLAR'S EFFORTS IN THIS DIRECTION.

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